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# Tower Report Tarnishes the Luster Of Abrams, Point Man on Contra Aid

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WASHINGTON, March 3 — The Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs, Elliott Abrams, who has been the Administration's point man on aid to the Nicaraguan rebels for the last two years, now finds his standing with Congress threatened as a result of the Iran-contra affair, according to foes and supporters alike.

These officials said questions and contradictory explanations on Mr. Abrams's role in the Iran-contra affair had eroded his credibility in Congress, and conservatives are said to be displeased by his recent support for the more moderate faction within the Nicaraguan rebel coalition.

Mr. Abrams has told colleagues at the State Department that, as one put it, "he doesn't think he was hit very hard" by the report of the Tower Commission. But Congressional opponents and even erstwhile supporters of Mr. Abrams, the State Department's most outspoken advocate of contra aid, said he would have to provide fuller explanations of his actions.

## 'Not Out of the Woods'

"He's certainly not out of the woods at all," said Senator Christopher J. Dodd, Democrat of Connecticut, who is co-sponsor of a bill to cut off \$40 million of aid due later this year to the Nicaraguan rebels. "You haven't heard from North, and apparently there was substantial contact there. He's got some explaining to do."

Mr. Dodd was referring to Mr. Abrams's frequent meetings with Lieut. Col. Oliver L. North, who the Tower Commission said used his position on the National Security Council staff to coordinate a covert network of military and financial aid to the Nicaraguan rebels, who are known as contras.

The Senator said that it "stretches credibility" to believe that Mr. Abrams was not more aware of Colonel North's activities than he told the Tower Commission, but that "I'm willing to listen."

A Republican Congressional aide said more bluntly, "Everything that I hear around here from anybody, Democratic and Republican, is that Abrams is finished."

## Supported the Cruz Faction

The aide said Mr. Abrams had been damaged among conservatives not only by the report but also by his decision to side with the more moderate faction of the Nicaraguan rebels against the leader of the contra military, Adolfo Calero. The moderate group, headed by Arturo Cruz, ousted Mr. Calero from his position in the rebels' political leadership in a dispute last month. Mr. Calero refused to relinquish his position as head of the main rebel military force, however.

The action led to harsh attacks on Mr. Abrams by conservatives, long his strongest supporters, at two major political meetings in the last several days.

In Congress today, Senator Alan Cranston of California, the Democratic whip, said it was "touch and go" as to whether there were enough votes to pass legislation to block the release of \$40 million in military aid to the rebels.

The \$40 million is the last portion of the \$100 million in aid for the contras that Congress approved last year. President Reagan is expected to ask for release of the money next week. Under the law, Congress has 15 days to consider the request.

These were among Mr. Abrams's activities cited in the Tower Commission report about which questions have been raised:

¶His role in the construction of a secret airstrip for use by the contras at Santa Elena, in northern Costa Rica near the border with Nicaragua, and in subsequent efforts to convince Costa Rican officials not to reveal its existence. The Chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee, David L. Boren, Democrat of Oklahoma, said he intended to question Mr. Abrams on this issue, and aides said this would probably take place next week.

¶His solicitation of \$10 million from Brunei to aid the contras and his decision to deposit the money to a Geneva bank account provided by Colonel North, from which it subsequently disappeared, rather than to an account established by the Central Intelligence Agency.

¶His overall knowledge of the extent of Colonel North's role in coordinating and financing the guerrilla war being waged by the Nicaraguan rebels at a time when assistance by the United States Government to the rebels was prohibited by Congress.

A Central Intelligence Agency official who testified before the Tower Commission said the Santa Elena airstrip was known to Mr. Abrams within a short time of his confirmation in July 1985 for the Inter-American Affairs position. Before that appointment, he was Assistant Secretary of State for Human Rights and Humanitarian Affairs.

The C.I.A. official said Mr. Abrams told him that he had learned of the airstrip from Colonel North.

The C.I.A. official also said the airstrip was a "pet project" of the United States Ambassador to Costa Rica, Lewis Arthur Tambs, who in his own testimony said he had been told by Colonel North that his goal should be to "open the southern front" for the contras. Mr. Tambs, who unexpectedly resigned in December, said this was

"confirmed by Abrams" and an unnamed C.I.A. official in subsequent conversations of a Restricted Interagency Group on Central America.

Mr. Abrams told the commission that he could not recall when or how he learned of the airstrip's existence and said that he believed the strip was never used. But Costa Rican investigators who visited it shortly before it was closed by the Costa Rican Government in September found aviation fuel, a barracks and fresh tire ruts there.

When Costa Rica's new President, Oscar Arias Sánchez, was told of the airstrip's existence, he took steps to have it closed and planned a news conference to announce that the Government was shutting down an "illegal support operation for the contras," the Tower Commission report said.

Colonel North, in a message on Sept. 9, 1986, to Vice Adm. John M. Poindexter, then national security adviser, said that he had held a conference call with Mr. Abrams and Mr. Tambs and that all had agreed that he should call President Arias and threaten him with a cutoff of United States aid unless he abandoned these plans. Colonel North said that he subsequently did so and that Mr. Arias had got "the same word from Elliott."

Mr. Abrams, in his testimony, said that the idea of a threat to cut off the \$80 million in United States aid to Costa Rica was never discussed and that he doubted Colonel North had ever called Mr. Arias. Mr. Arias said he had never spoken to Colonel North and had never been threatened by United States officials.

The Costa Rican Government announced the closing of the airstrip two weeks later.

## The Brunei Money

On the matter of the \$10 million put in a Swiss bank, Mr. Abrams acknowledged to the commission that he personally solicited the money from the Sultan of Brunei in July 1986. He said he had asked both Colonel North and the head of the C.I.A.'s Central America Task Force where the money should be deposited and had received different bank account numbers from each of them.

He said he and Charles Hill, executive secretary to the Secretary of State, had decided to use Colonel North's bank account, at Crédit Suisse, "on the grounds that it looked, oddly enough in retrospect, kind of cleaner."

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According to an earlier report by the Senate Intelligence Committee, the account number used by Mr. Abrams for the \$10 million was the same account suspected of being used by Colonel North and others to deposit proceeds from arms sales to Iran. According to a C.I.A. official quoted in the Tower Commission report, the money "went into a bank account in Geneva and disappeared."

"It just left me dumbstruck, and still does," the official said.

Supporters of Mr. Abrams insisted that Colonel North frequently lied to the Restricted Interagency Group, which included representatives from the State Department, the National Security Council, the Pentagon and the Central Intelligence Agency, not only about his activities but also about the status of the contra movement.

"Ollie would sit there and just practically cry about the starving contras he was in to visit," said another official who attended several meetings of the Restricted Interagency Group. "And meanwhile he was sitting on \$6 million in cash. He was lying to everyone here too."